

THE HONORABLE BOB GOODLATTE, CHAIRMAN, COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE

REVIEW OF THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE'S BOVINE SPONGIFORM
ENCEPHALOPATHY (BSE) RESPONSE

JANUARY 21, 2004

I would like to thank the Secretary for coming to the committee today for a hearing to review the Department's response to the finding of a BSE positive cow in the United States, which was announced less than a month ago. The committee appreciates that it has been an incredibly busy time and that there is still considerable work to be done. Please know that we value your hard work and the time you have taken to be here today.

The recent finding of the Canadian-born BSE-positive cow in Washington State has reinvigorated debate about a number of subjects—some of which are related to this issue and some of which are not. The committee will have a full schedule this year addressing many of these policy discussions. Following this hearing, the committee will be traveling to the world's largest livestock show and the International Livestock Congress in Houston, Texas to hold a field hearing on animal identification on March 5. Other topics will be dealt with in due course. For this reason, I encourage my colleagues to focus on oversight of the Department's response to date and resist the urge to have far-ranging discussions on every livestock-related subject imaginable.

Given the news we all received on December 23 and the concerns we all faced that day, I believe most analysts would be relatively pleased with where we are now, less than a month down the road. While cattle prices have declined in the range of 16–18 percent, they have been remarkably stable since immediately after the announcement. The press has been largely responsible in its coverage of events and all evidence indicates that consumer confidence in the safety of our beef supply has remained strong.

The market seems to have priced in the temporary loss of our beef exports, and I interpret the current stability as a vote of confidence that commercial interests, working hand in hand with government, will restore normalcy to this trade in a timely manner. While exports represent an important ten percent of the United States beef market, I would encourage all involved to keep the remaining ninety percent in mind as they consider solutions for re-opening markets. A cure that is worse than the disease is no cure at all.

The Department of Agriculture was swift to respond to the finding of this single cow in our Nation's herd. The public has been kept informed of events at every step, which is vital to maintaining consumer confidence. The Secretary has clearly made it a priority

to keep the communications channels open about the facts of this case and her actions in response.

However, I have questions about one element of the Secretary's announcement made on December 30. For some time, well-intentioned Members of Congress have sought to bar the movement of nonambulatory cattle, so-called "downers" in livestock commerce. As a result of ongoing consultations with the Department of Agriculture, we have resisted these efforts. This was a hotly debated topic in the conference discussions in the 2002 farm bill. USDA officials and White House representatives were present and contributed to staff discussions that led to the compromise language addressing nonambulatory livestock, which was subsequently signed by the President.

Our reason for rejecting the notion of simply barring nonambulatory livestock from commerce was not an indifference to sound animal stewardship principles—we all agree with and support animal welfare practices. Not only is it the law, it's the right thing to do.

Our reason for resisting these initiatives was that the policy of simply excluding these animals from commerce was incomplete. It failed to address important questions about what happens to these animals when they do not move forward in the food production system and how the vital task of animal disease surveillance would be conducted if the animals did not find their way to Government inspectors. Our concern remains, as the Secretary's announcement also failed to answer these questions.

The examination, diagnosis, and inspection of downed livestock by licensed veterinarians are a fundamental component of our Nation's animal health infrastructure in our efforts to detect diseases such as BSE, tuberculosis, and brucellosis. Prior to the Secretary's December 30 announcement, nonambulatory animals were the principle target of our BSE surveillance and testing regime. The fact is that if the Secretary's current policy had been in place previously, we would not even have found this BSE-infected cow.

In addition to a general review of where we stand and where we are going since the events of last month, I will be listening closely today about the Department's plan for monitoring nonambulatory animals that can no longer enter the food chain. What scientific evidence was used to arrive at this decision? How many animals are we talking about? How will this segment of the herd be monitored in the future? How does this improve animal health and public safety? What is the administration's position on expanding this policy to other species? The answers to these and other questions will help shape the policy process in the coming months.

Again, I thank the Secretary for her participation today and I look forward to her testimony.

